

# Roundtable: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Music: Introduction

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## ABSTRACT

This introduction provides an overview of this Roundtable on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and music. In addition to situating the issue in relation to previous studies of Rossetti and music, poetry and art, and suggesting some topics for future research, a summary of each article is provided, outlining its content and significance.

In identifying a focus for an interdisciplinary Roundtable centred on music, the choice of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) is perhaps unsurprising. Although Rossetti's sister Christina (1830–1894) proved more popular with composers, there are several musical settings and representations of Rossetti's poems and paintings that could provide interesting case studies. These range from Claude Debussy's cantata *La damoiselle élue* (premiered in 1893) to the fascinating melodrama (for narrator and piano) *The White Ship* (1911) by the American composer Wilberfoss George Owst (1861–1928), where the 'Synopsis of Musical Themes' explains how musical motifs denote key characters, sounds ('Shriek') and ideas (the 'king's ambition').<sup>1</sup> In terms of British music, one could point to Vaughan Williams's selection of six of Rossetti's sonnets that made up the song sequence *The House of Life* (including 'Silent Noon' – also set by C. W. Orr) published in 1904 or his cantata *Willow-wood* (1909), Arnold Bax's song 'Magnificat' (1907) subtitled 'After a Picture by D. G. Rossetti', Edward Elgar's part-song 'Go, song of mine' (1909), Ethel Smyth's *Sleepless Dreams* for chorus and orchestra (1910, published 1912), and Cyril Scott's 'An old song ended' (1911); John Ireland returned to Rossetti's poetry on several occasions, with song settings of 'English May' (in *Songs of a Wayfarer*, published 1912), 'Youth's Spring-Tribute' and 'Penumbra' as part of the 'Impression for voice and piano' *Marigold* (1913, published 1917), 'During Music' (from *Two Songs*, 1928), and 'The one hope' from *Three Songs* (published 1928), where the composer quoted from some of his previous works.<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, a shift of focus to Rossetti's *oeuvre* reveals how striking musical imagery is in his art and poetry – despite his apparent 'indifference to music' in a concert or staged setting, as documented by his assistant Henry Treffry Dunn.<sup>3</sup> In relation to the paintings, while some scholars have situated Rossetti's creative practice within the heightened sensuality, lack of temporality, and decadent continental influences (primarily Baudelaire and Wagner)

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Owst, *The White Ship* (New York, NY: G. Schirmer, 1911), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See also Alan Bush's unaccompanied part-song, 'During Music' (1964).

<sup>3</sup> See Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his Circle (Cheyne Walk Life)*, ed. by Gale Pedrick (London: Elkin Matthews, 1904), pp. 27–29, where Rossetti's derogatory remarks on Handel's *Messiah* and Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* are discussed, in addition to his collection of musical instruments (p. 26): 'old and mostly stringed – mandolins, lutes, dulcimers, and barbarous-looking things of Chinese fashioning'.

associated with a musical presence in art of the Aesthetic Movement more generally, others have highlighted the significance of representations of particular instruments such as the Japanese koto in *The Blue Bower* and *The Sea-Spell*, the lute in *Morning Music*, and the hybrid instrument consisting of ‘bell, strings and keyboards’ in *The Blue Closet*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, studies of poems such as ‘Eden Bower’, *The House of Life*, ‘The Sea-Limits’ and ‘A Little While’ have encouraged an exploration of music and gender, the idea of the ‘emphasis on the moment’, or concepts of musical listening – the ‘rhythmic, sonorous, and semantic shapeliness of line and phrase that makes lyric thought peculiarly memorable, inviting storage and repetition by listeners and readers.’<sup>5</sup>

All this invites further consideration of connections between the three arts, particularly given Rossetti’s propensity for representing particular subjects in multiple art forms.<sup>6</sup> For Lorraine Wood, for example, Rossetti’s poems such as ‘During Music’ and a range of artworks including those implying ‘missing’ instruments (such as *How They Met Themselves*) suggest how music, as ‘one of the most performance-orientated of all art forms’, was used by Rossetti as ‘a vehicle for positing his aesthetic theories about temporality and the interactive relationship between artist and viewer.’<sup>7</sup> Music has been viewed as interdisciplinary in itself (‘if [...] defined as an acoustic signal that evokes recognizable patterns of sound, implies physical movement, is meaningful and intentional, is accepted by a cultural group, and is not lexical’).<sup>8</sup> However, when explored via the shared concerns of the artistic and poetic, there is the potential for a richer purview, particularly given one definition of interdisciplinary studies as:

a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline [...] draw[ing] on the disciplines with the goal of integrating their insights to construct a more comprehensive understanding.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Suzanne Fagence Cooper, ‘Aspiring to the Condition of Music: Painting in Britain 1860’, in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, vol. 2, ed. by Jeremy Dibble and Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 251–77; Henry Johnson, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Japan: The Musical Instrument Depicted in *The Blue Bower* and *A Sea Spell*’, *Music in Art*, 30 (2005), 145–53; Alan Davison, ‘Woven Songs and Musical Mirrors: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Symbolic Physiognomy” of Music’, *The British Art Journal*, 13 (2012/13), 89–94; Karen Yuen, ‘Bound by Sound: Victorian Masculinity and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, *Critical Survey*, 20 (2008), 79–96 (pp. 86, 89–90). See also Jorge L. Contreras, ‘Poetics and Layers of Meaning in Rossetti’s *Forced Music*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 50 (2012), 189–205 and 207, positing a connection between Rossetti’s drawing *Forced Music* (and the later painting *Picture for a Story*), and Theodore Watts-Dunton’s sonnet ‘The Rosy Scar’.

<sup>5</sup> Yuen, ‘Bound by Sound’, pp. 90–91; Phyllis Weliver, ‘The “silent song” of D. G. Rossetti’s *The House of Life*’, in *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry*, ed. by Phyllis Weliver (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 194–212 (p. 195); Elizabeth Helsinger, ‘Listening: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Persistence of Song’, *Victorian Studies*, 51 (2009), 409–21 (p. 414).

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Dianne Sachko Macleod, ‘Rossetti’s Two Ligeias: Their Relationship to Visual Art, Music, and Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (1982), 89–102; Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Lorraine Wood, ‘Filling in the Blanks: Music and Performance in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, *Victorian Poetry*, 51 (2013), 533–60 (p. 533).

<sup>8</sup> Julie Thompson Klein and Richard Parncutt, ‘Art and music research’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. by Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein and Carl Mitcham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 133–46 (p. 142).

<sup>9</sup> Allen F. Repko and Rick Szostak, *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*, 3rd edn (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2017), p. 8.

The four articles in this Roundtable therefore suggest different ways in which an interdisciplinary approach to Rossetti and music might be conceived. Ekphrasis is addressed overtly in the titles of the first two articles. George Kennaway, who uses the term in the general sense of one artistic medium representing another, begins with the most familiar musical setting of a Rossetti poem – the forementioned *La damoiselle élue* by Debussy. Reminding us not only that Rossetti later painted the same subject twice, but that other artists were also attracted to the poem (Edward Burne-Jones and John Byam Shaw), Kennaway highlights both the nature of Gabriel Sarrazin's French translation, and the overall impact of Debussy's setting. However, what is less well known is that this Rossettian subject matter also stimulated a series of (primarily) British musical settings of the text in the form of recitations with piano accompaniment, and a variety of choral works – sometimes involving soloists. Stylistic variety, ranging from the conventional to the experimental, was matched by textual variety, with some composers opting to omit several of the poem's stanzas. Just as Rossetti's *Damozel* can be seen as a composite of both poem and painting, argues Kennaway, the addition of this group of musical settings creates a series of 'multiple ekphrastic *Damozels*'; ultimately, an informed listener-reader-viewer therefore has the opportunity to negotiate these various 'texts' to form their own judgement as to the nature(s) of the central character.

Beginning with the more specific definition of ekphrasis as a verbal representation of a work of visual art, Elizabeth Helsinger discusses the issues raised by a striking group of doubly ekphrastic works, where the art referenced in the poetry is itself a representation of music. Rossetti's sonnets 'For an Allegorical Dance of Women by Andrea Mantegna', 'On a Venetian Pastoral by Giorgione', and the 'Willowood' group from *The House of Life* all fall into this category. Encouraging us to consider aspects shared by the three arts such as patterning (colour, line, harmony, rhythm, metre, lineation), whilst highlighting the modern separation of music and poetry (as a contrast to the origins of poetry as song – a trope central to the understanding of Rossetti's sonnets), Helsinger argues that the music of these poems can be seen as 'a special kind of embodied knowing [...] an experience of music evoked by pictorial means as it might cast light on the work of poetry'. If music is 'an object of desire already lost' – not only in Rossetti's works, but in the contemporary pictures and poems in the 1850s and 1860s highlighted in the article – as Helsinger suggests, the ekphrastic sonnets are more akin to melopoetics: a music-literary criticism that explores not only the connections between music and poetry, but the poignancy of their separation.

Helsinger's discussion of unheard music includes references to Rossetti's 1857 watercolours *The Tune of the Seven Towers* and *The Blue Closet*, both highlighted by Marte Stinis in the third article of this Roundtable as catalysts for subsequent paintings that explored enclosed, interior musical spaces. Focusing on the concept of the 'bower', Stinis charts the development of these intimate music-related scenes in three paintings in particular – *The Blue Bower* (1865), *Veronica Veronese* (1872) and *La Ghirlandata* (1873). These can be seen, respectively, as an image of performance, a study of musical composition and creation, and an exploration of listening as part of the reception of music. Highlighting the richness of colour (particularly blues and greens), dress, flowers, foliage, and background patterning, as well as the different instruments (koto, violin and harp) and the way in which the female musicians relate to them physically (privileging a moment of touch in the first two paintings, rather than the sense of performance in the latter), Stinis proposes that these works offered Rossetti a new aesthetic category that he used to define his art – a dimension that favoured the suppression of narrative in order to provoke musical analogies, immersion, and viewer subjectivity. In the process, the article encourages us to draw parallels outside Rossetti's *oeuvre* – whether the invocation of Henry Bergson's *temps intérieur* to appreciate Rossetti's approach to temporality

in *The Blue Bower* in particular, or the suggestion that the mystical inwardness associated with music in these works was influential for a number of *fin-de-siècle* artists.

In the final article, we return to another Rossetti work that existed in both poetic and artistic form: ‘Sister Helen’; however it was Rossetti’s ballad that inspired the Scottish composer William Francis Stuart Wallace (1860–1940), whose range of artistic interests even led to his being compared directly to Rossetti. Wallace’s decision to re-figure Rossetti’s poem in the form of an orchestral work encourages us to consider expectations of how a ballad might be translated musically, particularly given Wallace’s preference for music that represented mood, rather than poetic events. Although some repetition of central musical elements reflects the driving narrative of the ballad genre, Wallace incorporated two more introspective episodes in his musical structure to rebalance aspects of the poem, echoing themes raised in contemporary literary criticism. Wallace’s 1899 lecture to the Musical Association, ‘The Scope of Programme Music’, and his other five symphonic poems, are invoked to help us understand this balance between the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’. Whilst the nature of Rossetti’s poem helps us to appreciate the details of Wallace’s musical re-figuring, this fascinating orchestral work can also be seen as a significant contribution to the reception history of Rossetti’s text.

The variety of methodologies and contexts in this Roundtable therefore not only suggests ways in which a musical context might be explored meaningfully in relation to Rossetti; hopefully it will also encourage further consideration of music’s role as part of the rich interdisciplinary potential of Victorian studies in general.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.